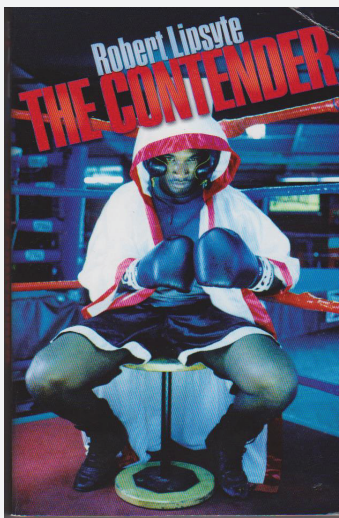


## Second Reaction: The Impact of Sports Literature on Adolescents and Young Adults

Lipsyte, Robert. *The Contender*. New York: HarperCollins, 1967.

Alan Brown



More than four decades after publication, Robert Lipsyte's (1967) *The Contender* remains a classic work of young adult literature and has become a model for any YA novelist hoping to include sports in his or her writing. For the upcoming September 2014 themed issue of *English Journal*, "A Whole New Ballgame: Sports and Culture in the English Classroom," Chris Crowe and I invited Robert Lipsyte to discuss the impact of sports literature on adolescents and young adults. In response, he posed four questions for helping students select worthy sports books (Lipsyte in press). I encourage readers to check out the full column, but for now, Lipsyte's questions provide a useful framework for considering how his own seminal work has stood the test of time.

1. Does the protagonist know why he is playing the game?

Yes. In fact, we can point to the exact moment when Alfred Brooks comes to this realization.

[Alfred Brooks] stood on the corner for a long time, looking up at the dim light until his neck hurt and his eyes watered. . . . The door leading up to the dentist's office and the gym was sagging off its hinges, half-open. Beyond it was

darkness. DONATELLI'S GYM. Joe Louis had worked out there once. . . . Maybe Sugar Ray Robinson, too. They weren't no slaves, and they didn't have to bust in anybody's grocery store. They made it, they got to be somebody. (26)

I would argue that *The Contender* isn't so much a story about boxing—a sport that garnered international attention for African Americans in the '30s and '40s thanks in part to the aforementioned Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson—as it is a story about growing up. Much in the way many teens now view football and basketball, boxing serves a distinct purpose for the protagonist Alfred, a high school dropout who is trying to beat the crime-infested streets of Harlem. Ultimately, sports provide students with an opportunity for escape.

2. Is bullying and player health dealt with in realistic fashion?

Bullying and player health are topics very much intertwined in *The Contender*. Alfred realizes early in the novel that his peers—many of whom are bullies involved with drugs, alcohol, and violence—represent his greatest opponent. To avoid social pressures, Alfred turns to Donatelli's Gym, and to the sport of boxing. A question that lingers even now is whether coaches like Mr. Donatelli, who put each boxer's well-being ahead of his own competitive and financial motivations, still exist in the world. I hope they do, but with the current win-at-all-costs mentality of sports in America, a useful debate for readers to consider is whether coaching athletics in the 21st century has more to do with teaching the game or winning the game.

3. Are the moral and ethical issues at least mentioned?

Moral and ethical issues abound in *The Contender*. For Alfred, considerations include his decision not to take part in a convenience store robbery, his concern for the pain inflicted upon others in the boxing ring, and the guilt he feels for his best friend's drug addiction. Perhaps most interesting, though, is Mr. Donatelli's decision to retire Alfred despite his winning ways. In an era of controversy surrounding performance-enhancing drugs and concussions, one of the most important conversations we can have with student-athletes is knowing when enough is enough. While the locker room or playing field might be better suited, there are no guarantees this conversation will ever take place between players and coaches. Thus, what better place for this discussion than in the English classroom and through the context of literature?

4. Will this book lead the reader into a larger world of literature or just into reading more sports books?

I suspect many teachers still use *The Contender* in their classrooms. If not, I wish they would. This text can connect with other bildungsroman novels (e.g., *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, *Slam!* by Walter Dean Myers, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger) or a unit on the American Dream (including *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Ex-Basketball

Player” by John Updike, “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes, and/or “The Prison” by Bernard Malamud).

The lessons taught in *The Contender* reach far beyond the world of sports. As with most great sports-related YA novels, the story begins and ends outside the athletic arena. And what students will likely remember most about the novel is exactly what Mr. Donatelli remembers most about Alfred: “I’ll never forget how you came up those dark steps. Alone. At night. Scared. You conquered your fear. You worked hard. You almost quit once, and then you came back and worked harder” (202).

All students face a similar path to contending—in school, in sports, and in life—before they ever become a champion. So many years later, Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender* is still showing students the way.

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### About the Author

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